

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently Amended) A method for packaging a product in a hermetically sealed container having a cup-shaped rigid or semi-rigid body provided with a rim fitted with solely a single closure, the method comprising:

- a) introducing the product into said cup-like shaped body;
- b) placing the container into a holder beneath and concentrically with a central opening of a spacer member;
- c) providing above the rim solely a single flat, flexible closure-forming, gas-impermeable membrane, said membrane extending between the spacer member and a pressing plate;
- d) relative ~~vertical displacement~~vertically displacing of the holder and the spacer member without displacing the membrane so as to form proximate to the rim a confined space, said space having at least one gas inlet and at least one gas outlet, said space being defined by an upper part of the container body, by the closure-forming membrane, by an inwardly facing surface of the central opening and by a peripheral portion of the holder, said confined space being formed adjacent to the rim and at a distance therefrom;

e) introducing an inert replacement gas through said inlet into said confined space in order to expel from the container body ~~to replace~~ at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body and replace it with the inert replacement gas;

f) displacement crosspressing displacing ~~of~~ said container body pressing place other further to bring the closure-forming membrane in contact with said rim; and

g) hermetically attaching the membrane to the rim to form a gas-tight seal therebetween.

2. (Original) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said product is a pasty material.

3. (Original) A method according to Claim 1 or 2, wherein said product is a food product.

4. (Previously presented) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the closure-forming membrane is a plastic film.

5. (Previously presented) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space is brought in communication with the external atmosphere via the said gas outlet.

6. (Previously presented) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space is brought in communication with a vacuum forming means via the said gas outlet.

7. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for forming a hermetically sealed product-containing container, the container having an essentially cup-like shaped body with a rim fitted with a closure; wherein said container is not filled entirely by the product such that a residual space remains between the product and the rim; the apparatus comprising:

- a holder for holding said container body;
- a spacer member, having a central opening,
- a means for bringing the spacer member into sealing engagement against the holder and against solely a single flat flexible closure-forming substantially a gas-impermeable membrane, the arrangement being such that when the spacer member is brought into ~~in the state of~~ sealing engagement the inwardly facing wall of said central opening, the container body, a peripheral portion of the holder and the closure-forming membrane, define together a confined space, said space is located adjacent to the rim and at a distance therefrom;
- at least one gas inlet and at least one gas outlet for introducing an inert replacement gas into said confined space, and

replacing at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body;

- a sealing mechanism comprising a displacing arrangement for displacing one or both of said container body and said flexible closure-forming membrane towards one another and attaching them to one another in a gas-tight fashion.

8. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said holder has an opening for receiving the body of the container.

9. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 8, wherein the opening of the holder is fitted with an axially projecting skirt ~~(110)~~ for engagement with the rim of the container ~~(106)~~.

10. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas outlet ~~(112)~~ is formed in the holder and comprises, through going bores.

11. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas inlet is formed in the spacer member and comprises nozzles for introducing a replacement gas into the confined space a sealed space.

12. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said sealing mechanism is provided with means for bringing

said closure-forming membrane into sealing engagement with the rim through the central opening of said spacer member.

13. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said closure-forming membrane is a continuous film, made of a heat-weldable plastic material.

14. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 13, comprising a trimming member for trimming edges of the closure-forming membrane brought into sealing engagement with the rim.

15. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to Claim 10, wherein said gas inlet comprises nozzles made in the spacer member for introducing a replacement gas into the confined space and a bottom surface of said holder is in sealing engagement with a vacuum-forming cup, wherein said gas outlet is in communication with the vacuum-forming cup.

16. (Previously presented) An apparatus according to claim 14, in which said sealing mechanism is provided with a heat sealing plate wherein the trimming member and the heat sealing plate are axially displaceable towards the closure-forming membrane through the central opening in the spacer member.

17. (New) The method according to claim 1 wherein the inert gas is nitrogen or carbon dioxide.

18. (New) The apparatus according to claim 7 wherein the inert gas is nitrogen or carbon dioxide.

19. (New) The method according to claim 1 wherein the gas-impermeable membrane is gas impermeable in its entirety and is directly adjacent the product there being no physical element between the product and the gas impermeable membrane.

20. (New) The apparatus according to claim 7, wherein the gas-impermeable membrane is gas impermeable in its entirety and is directly adjacent the product there being no physical element between the product and the gas impermeable membrane.